

Alabama's Literary Capital Continues to Write Its Story Through Economic Development Academy



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Do the titles “To Kill a Mockingbird,” “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” and “Crazy in Alabama” ring any bells? One can look far and wide and would have a difficult time finding a city that has had a greater impact on American literature than the city of Monroeville. Founded in 1899, the county seat for Monroe County (a county older than the state) has a unique place in American history. In 1997, the Alabama Legislature designated Monroeville as the Literary Capital of Alabama because of the many famous writers it has produced such as, Nelle Harper Lee, Truman Capote, Mike Stewart, Cynthia Tucker and Mark Childress. The city, which is located in between Montgomery and Mobile, is made up of about 6,000 residents.

In 2022, city leadership participated in the first class of the Alabama League of Municipalities’ Economic Development Academy (EDA) program to assess where Monroeville could grow and to learn how to attract industry, retail and residential development. EDA was developed in conjunction with the Alabama Community College System with the goal to educate and engage municipal officials on the essential elements and phases of economic development while highlighting their vital role in economic initiatives and projects within their communities. The Monroeville EDA team consisted of Mayor Charles Andrews, Councilman Al Brewton, Councilman Kenneth Ruffin, City Clerk Tamekia Hunt and Monroeville/Monroe County Economic Development Authority Director Darlene Thompson.

Mayor Andrews, a native of Monroe County, took office in November 2020. He said, “The Economic Development Academy provided resources, contacts,



The Lofts at 41 provide a new Airbnb space for downtown Monroeville.



Monroeville is constructing a new 48-unit apartment complex.



programs and data to enable the team to guide the city. The experience was joyful and informative.”

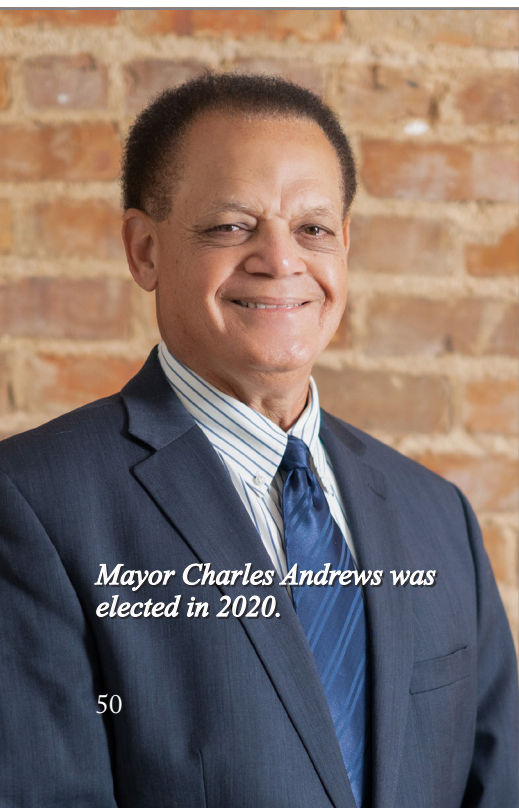
As part of the EDA, participating communities complete a community vitality index to learn about their strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, like many rural Alabama cities and towns, the community vitality index revealed that Monroeville’s population has decreased, and it needs help with increasing access to it. The nearest interstate highway is approximately 20 miles away, and it does not have a four-lane highway leading to it.

Nonetheless, Monroeville prides itself on its charming, family-oriented atmosphere. The city square is at the heart of Monroeville and features the Old Monroe County Courthouse, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. Also, in 2021, the historic courthouse became a National Historic Landmark, making it one of 39 in the state for its historical impact and significance to our country. Each spring, local actors come together to perform a production of the play “To Kill a Mockingbird” in the world-famous courthouse in front of their loved ones and literary enthusiasts from near and far.

More of Monroeville’s assets and traditions include an amphitheater, baseball fields, car shows, concerts, parades and Mardi Gras celebrations. The city also boasts multiple gathering places and event venues, such as The Community House (located in the former Vanity Fair Community Center), The Water Works Conference Center (located in the base of a 2-million-gallon water tower), The Shoppe (a renovated 1940s county road department shop) and a new 4,000 square-foot pavilion in Veteran’s Park. Additionally, Monroeville is quite a safe city with a solid public safety plan, which should come as no surprise considering Mayor Andrews’ 40-year career in law enforcement. He served as the director of Alabama’s Department of Public Safety (now a division of the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency) and as a United States marshal.

In 2005, Monroeville earned the designation as an Alabama Community of Excellence. In order to be deemed one of the top places to live in Alabama, the city was required to meet detailed criteria in leadership, planning, economic development and quality of life. Nearly two decades later, city officials remain committed to their goals and still provide biannual reports to the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program, a program now under the purview of the League. City officials credit both ACE and EDA with helping them to make informed decisions and establish relationships to shape Monroeville’s future. In fact, the downtown has benefitted from several entities taking a united approach to revive it including the Monroeville/Monroe County Chamber of Commerce, Monroeville Main Street, the Monroeville/Monroe County Economic Development Authority and the Monroeville Downtown Redevelopment Authority.

Based off feasibility studies, Monroeville’s EDA approved project focused on recruiting a hotel, such as



Mayor Charles Andrews was elected in 2020.



City officials and community members celebrate a recently renovated apartment complex near downtown Monroeville.

a Holiday Inn Express or Hampton Inn. This remains a work in progress, but city officials feel better equipped to hold negotiation discussions following their EDA training. Meanwhile, short-term rental options, like Airbnb, have expanded greatly, especially in the downtown area. The city has experienced growth in housing options as well with the construction of a new 48-unit apartment complex and the renovation of an existing 20-unit apartment complex.

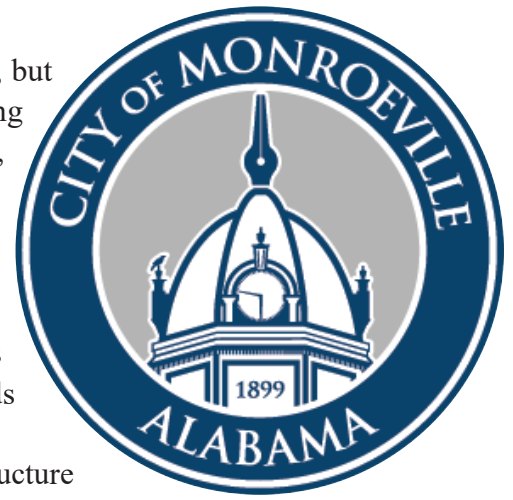
Mayor Andrews shared, “EDA impacted the decision-making process on recruiting by identifying what industries and businesses meet the needs of the city and if the city has the resources to attract them.”

Since participating in EDA, the city has pursued grants and other infrastructure resources to attract potential prospects. In an effort to retain existing businesses, the city gives tax breaks and incentives to those looking to expand or upgrade their facilities. These efforts are panning out in a major way. Just this year, Monroeville has secured two major announcements. Sterling Packaging Co., a second-generation manufacturing company, invested in a \$3.1 million project to add a Landa S10 Printing Press to their facility, which will boost production of its food and beverage containers by 25%. With the potential for growth, the company could increase its workforce to approximately 60 employees. Second, the city has a new cattle processing facility, Farm Fresh Cattle. This project is over a \$1.5 million investment and will employ between 10 and 15 employees.

Furthermore, Harrigan Lumber Company, which began operations in 1974, recently launched a multi-million-dollar expansion. The city has also opened a new RV park; constructed a new welding training facility at Coastal Alabama Community College; and has secured a location for a new restaurant, Popeye’s Chicken.

“The EDA exceeded our expectations by presentations from subject matter experts,” Mayor Andrews said. “The opportunity to be exposed to the wealth of knowledge available from peers that were willing to share their experiences was very valuable.”

As Monroeville writes its next chapter, the mayor said they have plans to expand its industrial park, recruit retail businesses, invest in work force development and expand tourism and events to promote the city. ■



For more information
about the EDA program,
scan this QR code.



Coastal Alabama Community College just opened a new welding training facility at its Monroeville campus.

